

John MacDonald

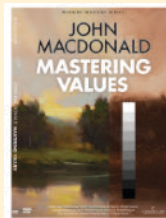
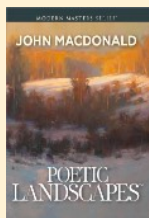
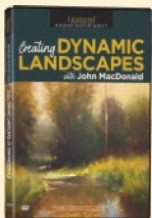


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March–April, 2024

COMPOSITION: DESIGN 1

This newsletter is the fourth in a series addressing the subject of composition. In this issue, we'll begin looking at the heart of composition: Design. We'll begin with the first three steps: establishing the frame, placing the focal point, and moving the eye into the painting and to the focal point. The steps have been separated here for the sake of clarity and explanation but in practice they often occur concurrently as part of a single, intuitive process.



PaintTube Videos

Interested in my painting process? In *"Dynamic Landscapes"* and *"Poetic Landscapes"* I describe it in detail. If you're interested in learning more about those crucial values, check out the video, *"Mastering Values."*

For more information and to order the videos, click [HERE](#).

If you've been enjoying these newsletters and are able to make a donation, any contribution would be appreciated. If you've just begun receiving them, feel free to peruse them first.

To make a donation, click [HERE](#).

To the many of you who've already contributed~ *Thank you!*



Establish the Frame—the Four Most Important Lines

A landscape is seamless. We see a specific part of it but need only turn our heads to realize it unfolds in an unbroken, 360° whole. Begin by choosing a part of the scene and separate it from the seamless panorama of nature with a frame. The four lines of the border are the most important lines in the composition. Every shape within it is affected by and will relate to the edges of the canvas. We can't begin designing the composition without a border.



When scene is framed, each area of the landscape can be more easily seen as a flat shape of value. Seeing the elements of the scene as separate value shapes rather than things in a seamless whole, we can move them around to build the composition.



Fit the Format to the Scene–Proportion

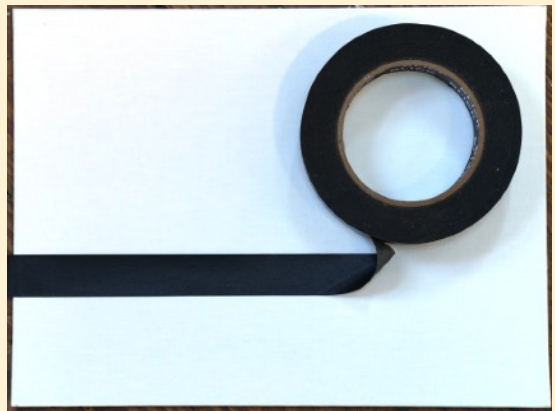
No matter how similar in appearance, every landscape will have some unique features. In theory, each painting should have a uniquely proportioned frame. In practice, it's easier to use a standard size of canvas and tweak the scene to fit the proportions of our canvas. With the wide range of standard sizes available, there is almost always a standard format that will work. But choose carefully! Not every format will produce a successful composition.

Here are two extreme choices: a panoramic format and a nearly square format. Changing the format can change the emphasis in a painting, which may change the message. Some formats will enhance the message while others may weaken it. Fit the format to your intention.



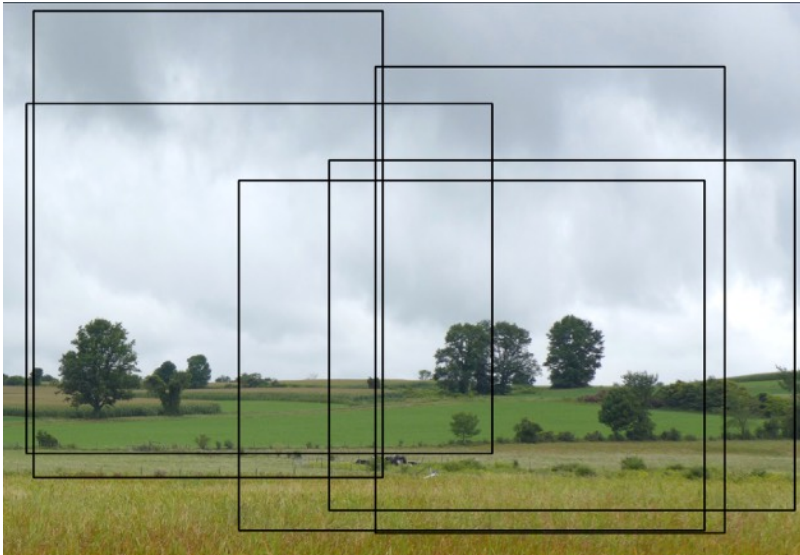
When either format is likely to result in a successful painting, make the choice depending on what you want to say.

If a scene requires a unique proportion of canvas, use tape to create the correct format. If using a panel, it can be easily cut after the painting has dried.



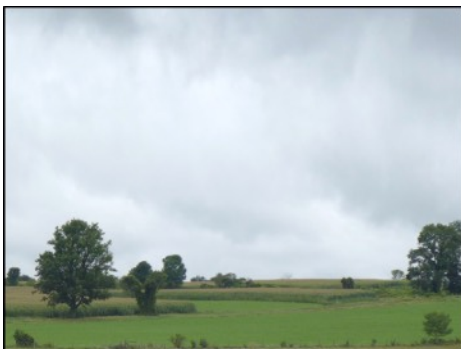
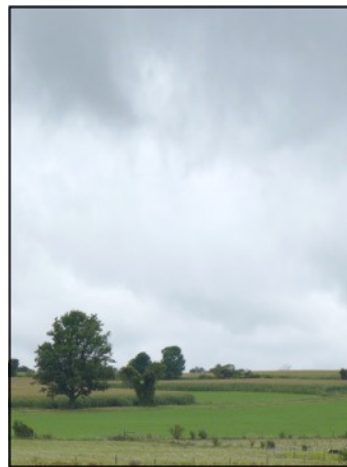
Shifting the Frame

Once you have chosen a proportion, move the frame around the scene. Experiment with vertical and horizontal formats. Nature never gives us a perfectly composed scene; we'll always need to make changes. Some scenes provide better raw material than others. A landscape that offers good compositional possibilities may need nothing more than the right choice of cropping.



Move the frame up, down, and sideways to experiment with different ways to crop the scene. How does this affect the placement of the focal point or the message of the painting? How we crop a scene can change its mood and message.

Here, a 3:4 proportion (9"x12," 12"x16") has been chosen. Simply by moving it around the scene, I discover various options that result in paintings with slightly different moods, focal points, or messages.



The same 3:4 format but five different croppings results in five different paintings. Are any of the compositions better than others? Any weaker? Experimenting with different croppings will strengthen our compositional visual muscles.



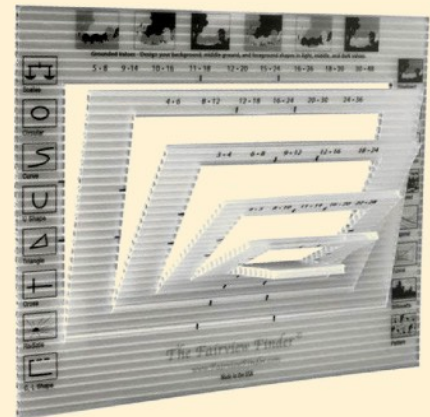
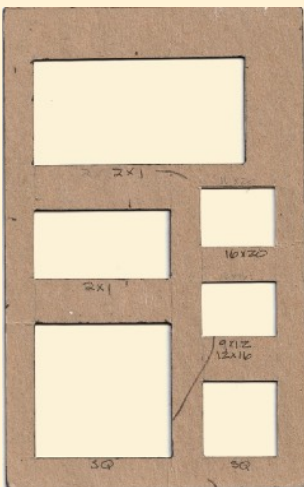
Zooming In and Out

A story is told of Corot painting deep in a forest. Standing in the woods, he noticed a small gap between two tree trunks and beyond it, a distant landscape. The finished painting was of a vista, of open fields and sky. He had painted only a small portion of what he had seen.

Although our eyes have a fixed focal length (similar to a 50 mm camera lens), our imaginations do not. Experiment with zooming in and out of a scene. Just as with shifting the frame, zooming in or out gives us additional compositional possibilities from which to choose.



VIEWFINDERS can greatly help us when choosing a format and deciding how much of a scene to paint. There are a variety available—artist viewfinders, homemade viewfinders, the camera viewfinder, and we can even use our fingers in a pinch.



Above: The Fairview Finder©
(www.FairviewFinder.com)

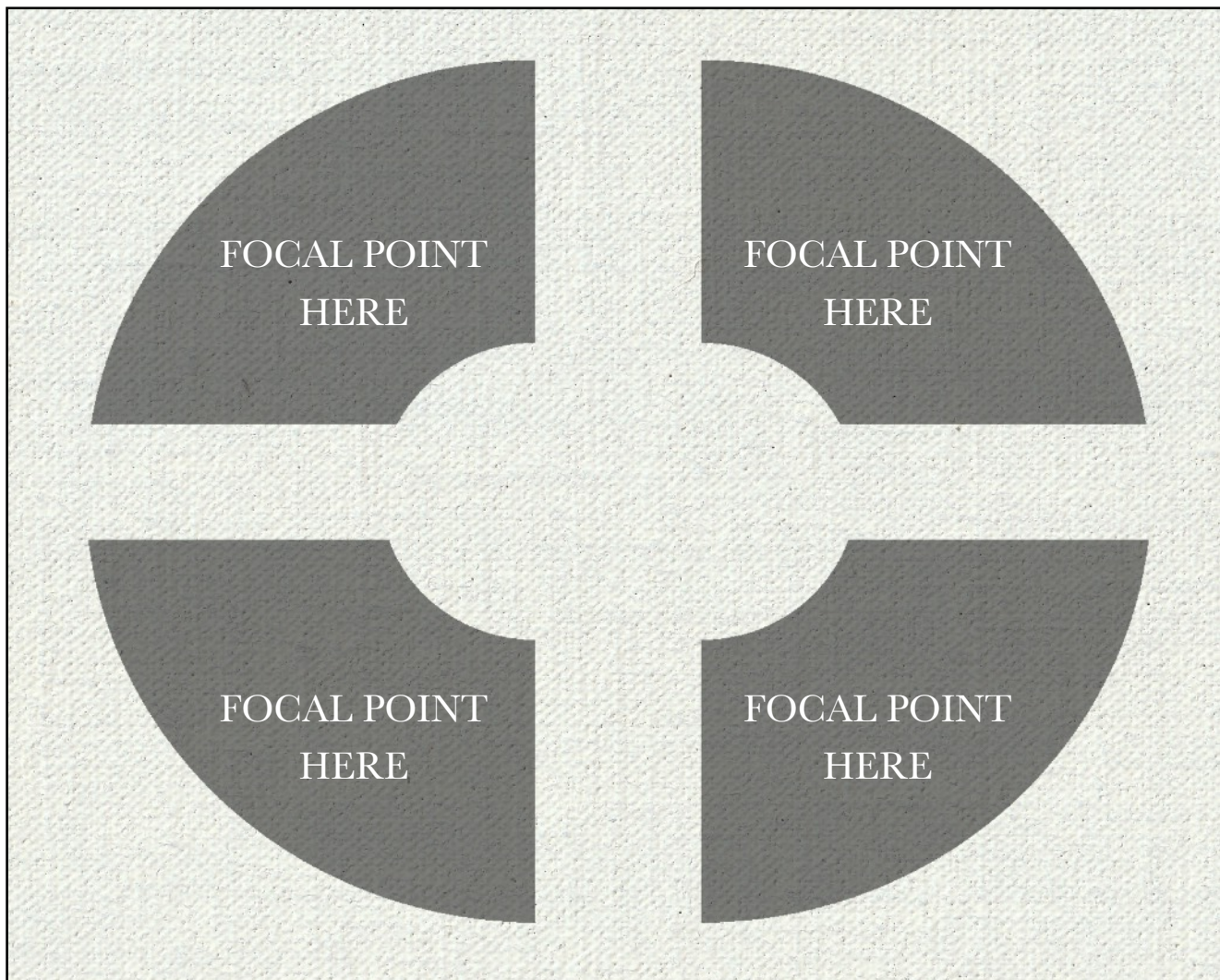
Left: The View Catcher (available at most online art retailers)

Far left: my homemade viewfinder.

Placing the Focal Point within the Frame

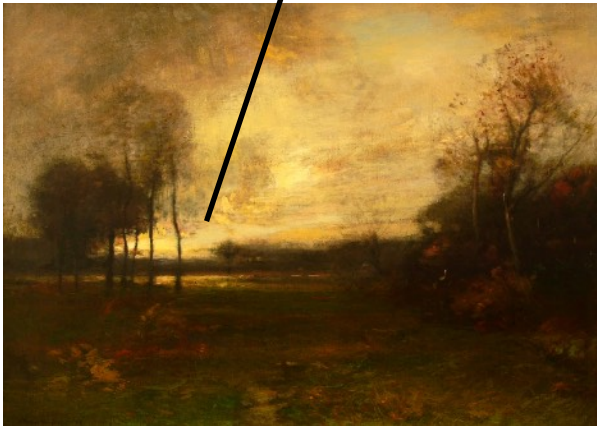
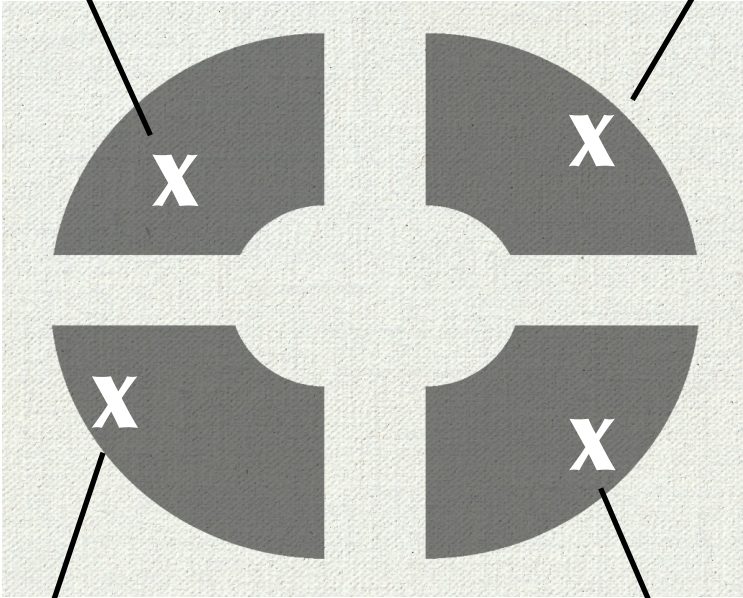
In the process of moving the frame around the scene or zooming in or out, it's crucial to consider the placement of the focal point. The focal point carries the bulk of our message and our intention.

There are numerous systems claiming to offer the perfect formula for the placement of the focal point, using mathematics, grids, diagonal divisions of the canvas, or the Golden Ratio. I find that most are overly complex. Here's my theory, what I'll call the Quartered Bagel Theory of Composition (QBTC): picture a bagel cut into quarters and placed on the canvas. Now place the focal point within one of the areas covered by the segments of the bagel. Review a hundred successful paintings and you'll find that the focal points in 95% of them will adhere to the QBTC.

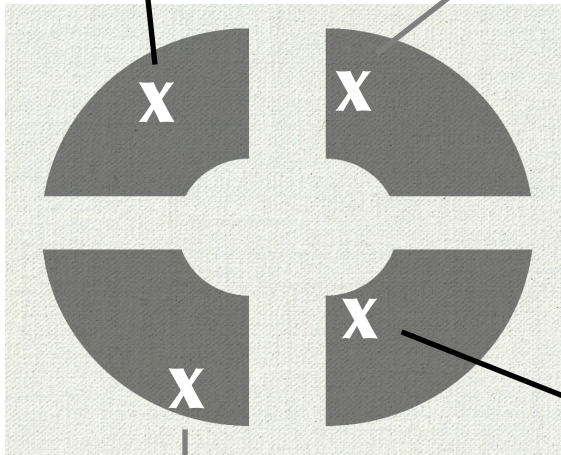


If you prefer written rules to visual aids, it's simple: **when placing a focal point, avoid the exact center, the extreme edges, and the vertical and horizontal axes of the canvas.**

Here are eight good paintings with their focal points matched to the bagel theory.



Clockwise from top left: Chauncey Ryder (unknown title); George Inness, *Spring Blossoms* Montclair, New Jersey; Dwight Tryon, *Twilight November*; J. Francis Murphy, *Indian Summer*.



Clockwise from top left: Aureliano de Beruete y Moret, *El puente de Alcantara, Toledo*; Rembrandt, *Self Portrait*; Gustave Klimt, *Morning Pond*; Jean Siméon Chardin, *Glass of Water and Coffee Pot*.

Lines Direct the Eye – Contrasts Attract the Eye

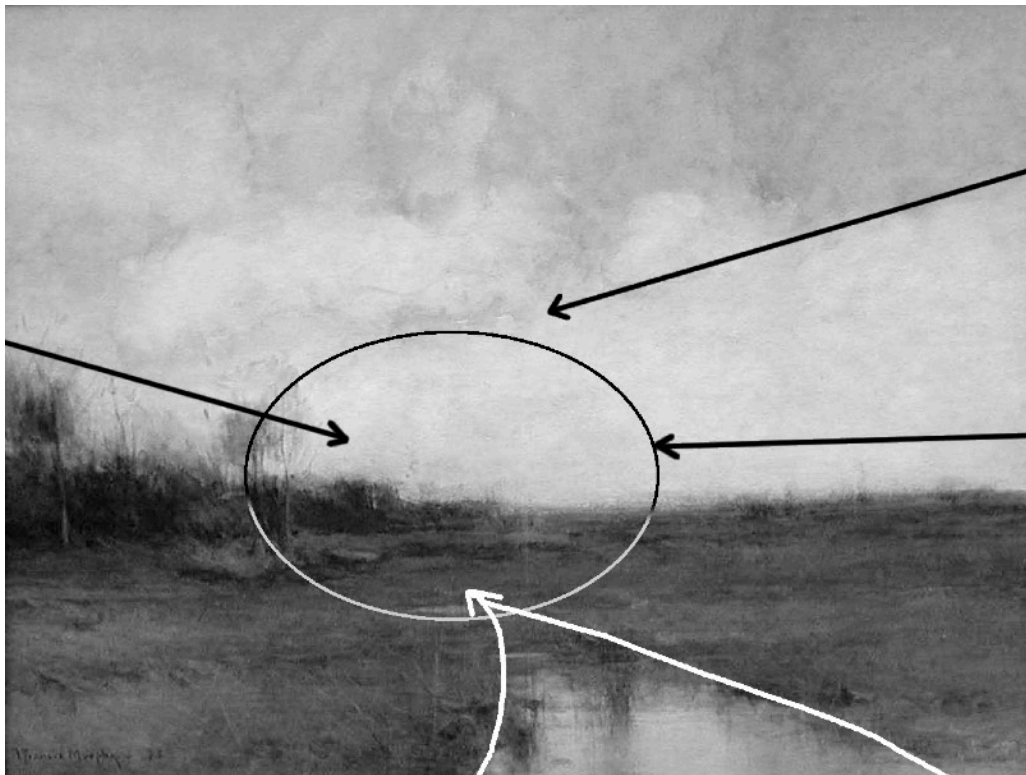
A simple definition of a landscape composition could be: a design of shapes of various contrast that leads the eye into the painting, keeps it in the painting, and eventually leads it to the focal point. Let's look at those three steps of good landscape composition:

1. **Get the eye through the foreground.**
2. **Lead it to the focal point without trapping it there.**
3. **Keep it in the painting.**



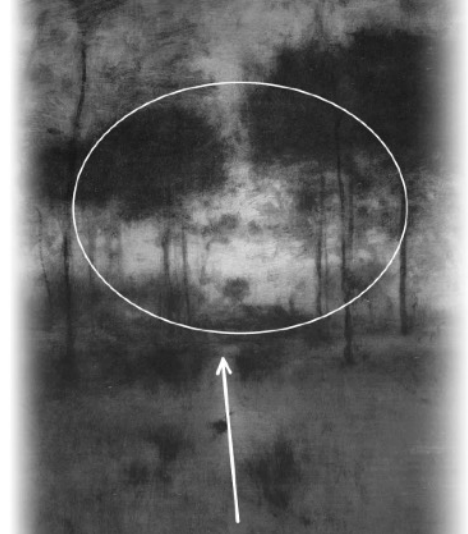
The eye is **attracted** (pulled) to contrasts, which can be contrasts in values (the strongest), color, edges, the amount of detail (complexity vs simplicity), size, or shape.

The eye is **directed** (pushed) by line—it follows the edges of shapes. The simpler and more prominent the line, the more easily the eye is directed. This painting by J. Francis Murphy provides a good example. The foreground diagonals and simple lines of the horizon lead the eye into the painting and to the focal point—the area of greatest contrasts.

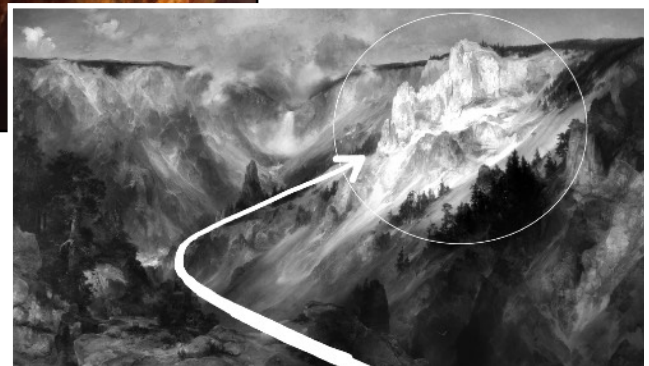


Draw the Eye into the Painting and Through the Foreground

It's worth repeating: **the eye is attracted by contrasts but directed by line.** In order to move the eye through the foreground, it's important to avoid placing strong contrasts there that will attract the eye and hold it. Rely on line to lead the eye through the foreground.



Above, Inness used a suggested path to create a line that leads the eye to the area of greatest value contrasts and complexity of shapes. Below, in a much more detailed painting, Thomas Moran uses the same elements: diagonal lines that lead the eye through the foreground, and eventually to the area of greatest value contrasts: the focal point.



For a more thorough and detailed explanation about foregrounds and how to lead the eye through them, see the [March-April 2021 newsletter](#)

Keeping the Eye in the Painting

The eye will naturally want to remain within the painting—why else are we looking at it? But there are two compositional mistakes that can lead the eye out of the painting: strong diagonals that converge beyond the border of the painting, and an area of greatest contrast placed on an edge of the canvas. As an example, here's one of my paintings from 2019.



Left, the original painting. The focal point (area of greatest contrast) is above and to the right of the center of the canvas, but the strong diagonal lines of the trees and their reflections in the water lead the eye to the left edge and almost off the canvas. That strong pull towards the left weakens the painting.



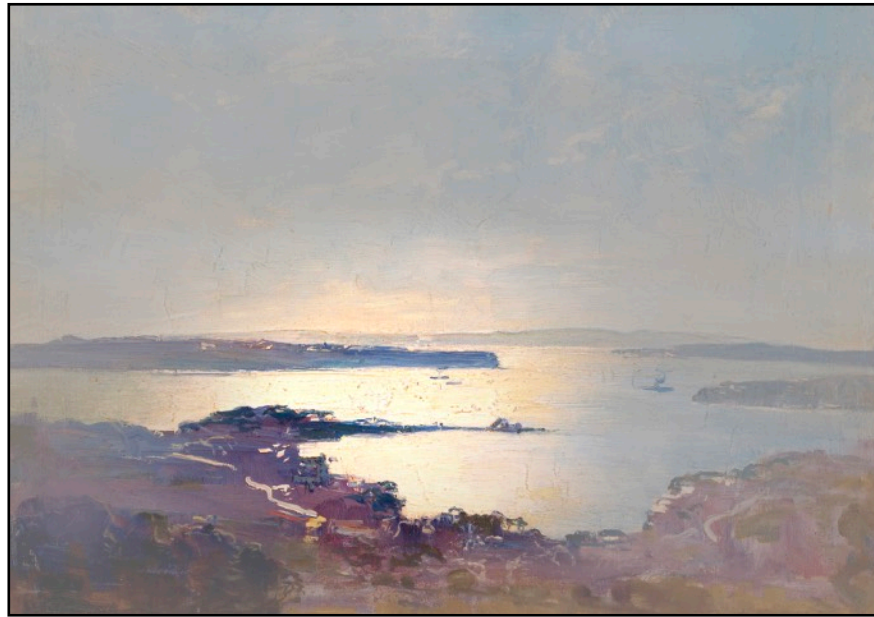
On the right, I've exaggerated the flaws by moving the focal point to the left edge and strengthening the converging diagonals that lead to the edge. Now the eye is drawn directly off the canvas, barely pausing to look at any other areas of the painting.



Left, fixing the problem. I've returned to the original painting and made multiple changes. I've strengthened the focal point by increasing the contrasts, placed lights in the clouds to create a line from top left to the focal point, and added a distant hill on the left edge that slants *into* the painting. Finally, to soften the strong diagonals that lead the eye to the left, I've varied the edge of the trees against the sky. The result is a better painting than the original. The eye now stays completely within the frame of the painting.

Trapping the Eye at the Focal Point

The greater the difference between the amount of contrasts in the focal point and those in the rest of the painting, the stronger the focal point will appear. If that difference in contrasts is too great, the eye will be trapped and held to the focal point. To avoid this, either reduce the contrasts in the focal point or create secondary focal points, always **ensuring that the amount of contrast in each focal point varies**. Two areas of **equal** contrast will always attract the eye equally. That should always be avoided.



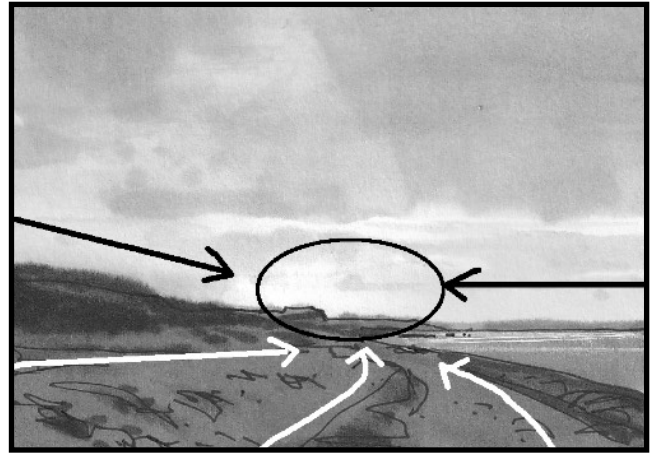
In the altered painting by Penleigh Boyd above, I've exaggerated the contrasts at the focal point and reduced contrasts everywhere else. Below is his original painting. It has secondary areas of interest with various amounts of contrast that attract the eye, but none attracts it as strongly as the focal point. The eye can move around the painting, eventually settling on the focal point.



Tonal Sketches

In this newsletter, we looked at three early steps in the Design stage of composition: establishing the frame, placing the focal point, and leading the eye into the painting and to the focal point. We can explore all three steps by creating tonal sketches – small, monochromatic studies of simple shapes bound within a frame of the same proportion as our canvas. They're quick to execute and provide an opportunity to experiment and analyze a composition.

This certainly isn't the first time I've advocated using tonal studies prior to painting. For more information about how and why to create them, see the following newsletters: November-December 2018, September-October 2019, March-April 2020, and May-June 2020.



Above, the sketch at left is approximately life size, about 2.5" in width. For a tonal study, it's rather detailed but it's the major shapes and line, not the details, that lead the eye in to the focal point.

To the right is a sketch with much less detail, yet it can be just as useful when evaluating the composition.



Slow Down!

Because composition is THE most important component of a painting, the time spent working on it before touching a brush is time well spent. If we start painting immediately, we're composing the painting—choosing the right shapes and their relationships—while simultaneously trying to mix the right color with the appropriate saturation and the correct value. It's so much easier to begin by focusing solely on the composition. With fewer mistakes to correct as the painting develops, we discover that we're more productive. We create not just more paintings, but more *successful* paintings.

Four-Day Workshop in Inveraray, Scotland

October 13–17, 2024

Join me for a painting workshop in beautiful Scotland. For information and to reserve a place, email Elaine Miller: EKMiller70@gmail.com, using the subject line, "SCOTLAND with John MacDonald."



COST:

\$1995 shared room

\$2595 private room

***Food and travel expenses
are not included.***

Two-Day Workshop in Bennington, Vermont

November 1–2, 2024

A two day workshop focusing on the essentials of painting: composition, value structure, color contrasts, etc. We'll be working in the spacious studios of the Monument Arts and Cultural Center.

Depending on the weather, we may move outdoors for plein air work.

For information and to reserve a place, email Linda Masten at Lindamarymasten@gmail.com



COST:

\$375

Limited to 14.

Words of Wisdom

"If people knew how hard I worked to get my mastery, it wouldn't seem so wonderful after all."

– Michelangelo (1475–1564)

"Eighty percent of success is showing up."

– Woody Allen (b. 1935)

***Stay well,
Be creative,
and Happy Painting!***